



THE LATEST VERSION OF HR IS RH: RESPECT FOR HUMANKIND AT WORK

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"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

-Maya Angelou

Over the last three decades, the practice of HR has experienced significant transformation. This has included HR moving from being a lower level, administrative and maintenance oriented function to operating in many organizations as a core business function and a strategic business partner. Because of dramatic changes that have occurred in HR, the question arises whether HR has arrived at its final purpose or whether the journey will continue and if so, what is next for HR?

To continue with the same practice, we propose that future HR will need to adopt an outside/inside approach where the external environment and stakeholders influence what HR does inside the organization.

Why do we respect some persons? We respect people for various reasons. Some may have fought very adverse circumstances and reached where they are today. We respect some people for who they are, for the values they practice or for what they have done for us. In an organization where people focus on work, you are respected for performance of your role.

Typically the 'operating functions' of HR [like recruitment, training, compensation, talent management, employee engagement etc.] are such where everybody claims to have deep insight, although this may be often a tall and unproven claim. A production manager thinks he knows how to interview, a sales manager thinks that he can design a training program or a variable pay scheme. Every manager thinks that he knows how to build relations with people and manage people. These claims are usually made to tell the HR Manager that 'I am better than you.' And the trouble is that the HR manager is unable to counter these effectively. Why so?

That's because usually HR Managers do not see that their role is that of a specialist or an expert. Moreover the designations are given to keep HR Managers away from perceiving his role as an expert. Take 'HR Generalist' role for example. Even in that role he is an expert. Or he must be.

Can he tell the Production Manager 'I know how to interview people; I am skilled in BEI [Behavioural Event Interview] technique. Something you do not know.' Can he tell the Sales Manager 'I know how to design a training program; I can apply 'Krickpatrick principles.' If he can, he will earn respect.

The problem is that most HR functionaries try to crack problems on sheer common sense or rational thinking – both these are available in abundance in the population. There is no differentiation for HR manager unless he demonstrates that he has skills or knowledge others do not have. The biggest misconception about Human Resources is that HR is designed for the benefit of the employee. HR is, without question, a representative of the organization, not its people. It was originally created as a powerful response to unions, and it still exists as a somewhat anti-labor function. That's not to say that HR can't operate humanely and with compassion for its people, but in the end, if there's a fight between an employee and the company, HR is fighting for the company.

What exactly does 'Respect for People' mean? And just who are we supposed to be respecting? Common understanding of the principle is often that management should treat their employees nicely and with dignity, almost in a humanitarian context. While this is surely an integral part of the philosophy, it actually goes much deeper than that. Respect for People is not a soft, fuzzy notion of leadership fantasy, but a very specific approach to ensuring a sustainable organizational culture of people-driven change and improvement in order to increase overall performance.

A respectful workplace creates productive and engaged employees. On the other hand, workplaces where employees feel disrespected experience high levels of turnover, conflict, grievances, and low levels of engagement, attendance and productivity.

In large, bureaucratic organizations, the jobs of recruiting and counseling employees naturally fall on the human resources staff. But in a company made up primarily of knowledge workers, it is very difficult for the HR department to carry off the job. It simply can't provide the vision and the direction that knowledge workers look for and get excited about.

So, what are some ways you can nurture a culture of respect in your organization, and prevent a lack of respect from snowballing out of control?

Define the example. People have differing definitions of what respectful behaviour in the workplace means. This is where defining and teaching what respectful (and disrespectful) behaviour looks like can help remove the margin for error that comes with a subjective interpretation of respect, while articulating and highlighting the culture you want.

Encourage others' opinions and ideas. Especially when those opinions differ from ours, this one is hard for most of us, but it's an important way to show respect. Considering multiple perspectives also has its merits—even if you don't agree with an idea, it can often be used to change or improve work outcomes.

Demonstrate patience and professionalism at all times. Fact: There are people out there whose personalities aren't going to be your cup of tea. Also a fact: At some point, you will still have to work with one of those people. So find personal coping mechanisms—take a yoga class, repeat a mantra, bite your tongue, master deep breathing, and figure out how you can co-exist respectfully and safeguard your own mental health, even if you're not eager to become their best buddy.

Put it in writing. Include a bullying and harassment policy and procedure in your employee handbook (it's the law!), and have employees help draft a code of respectful workplace expectations – if they've helped create it, they'll be much more likely to abide by it.

Make note of where you could improve. Take the time to reflect on how messages and actions could be perceived. Review your daily interactions with your team. Look at your emails – how do you begin messages, and how do you sign off? Opening with a "Hi" and signing off with "Thanks" isn't exactly onerous, and conveys a much more positive tone, yet it's something many of us neglect when we're busy. Do you take the time to greet your team in the morning, or ask after a coworker's weekend? Communicating in more positive ways is an easy habit to get into and perpetuates a culture of respect. These friendly touches are an investment in stronger teams and a more positive work environment.

Recognize the positive. Be a champion for respect. When positive stuff happens, notice it, acknowledge it, and perpetuate it. It's like a snowball. Once you've got it rolling, it will build upon itself until you've created something great.